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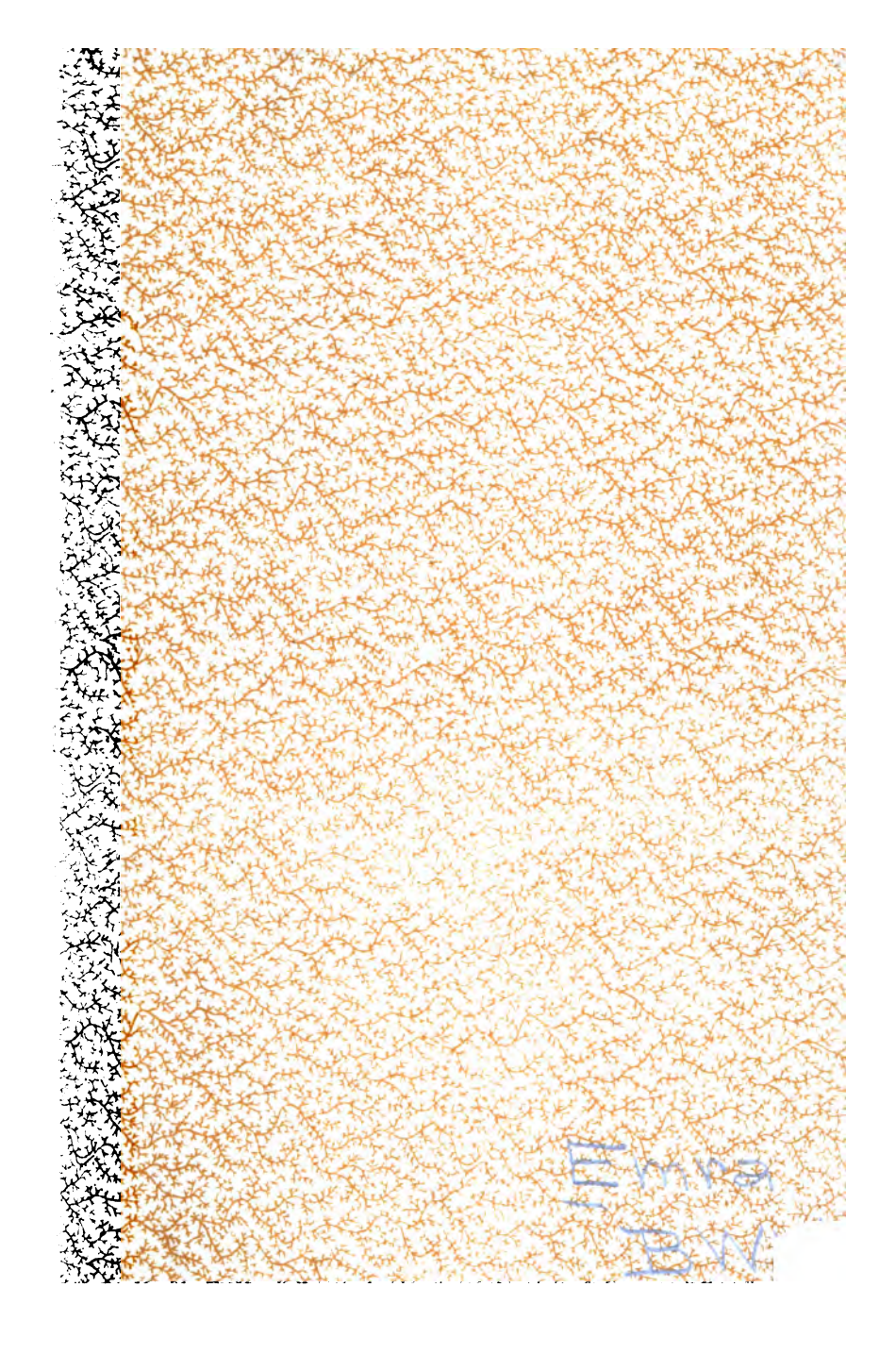

THE

CENTRE OF THE CENTRAL SEA

THE CENTRE OF THE CENTRAL SEA

ILLUSTRATED

MALTA . . . SICILY

AN ASCENT OF MOUNT ETNA BY OFFICERS OF A MAN-OF-WAR

BY

J. N. EMRA

LATE LIEUTENANT ROYAL MARINES

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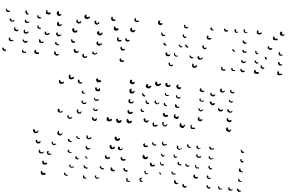

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PREFACE.

IN "The Centre of the Central Sea" the lover of classic lore will greet the ghosts of ancient myths which hover round the slopes of Etna and on the flowery plains of Sicily; the student of modern scientific research will find how even such close observers as Mr. Gladstone—to say nothing of compilers of dictionaries and educational manuals—have been led into utterly erroneous views regarding volcanic phenomena; and to the general reader this narrative of life among young officers of the Royal Navy may, perhaps, prove pleasant reading.

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THE CENTRE

OF

THE CENTRAL SEA.

I.

MALTA, A ROCK OF OFFENCE.

MALTA is the purgatory of the British Mediterranean Fleet. Romance clings to its historic rocks and waters; travellers tell secrets of its striking beauty; yet its very name is a synonym of misery and discomfort in the messrooms of the army from which its garrison is drawn. In the matter of standing grievances the navy recognizes the supremacy

of its sister service, in which there is a narrower *esprit de corps*, and less duty to perform. Army officers are helplessly driven by *ennui* into that derogatory position of persistent grumbling which men of thought among them cannot but deplore. What the outside world knows of Malta is mostly filtered through one or other of these official sources, and, the twin services holding joint and several patents on the privilege of growling at even imaginary cause, the shadeless island in the centre of the Mediterranean lies under a burden of censure, disproportionate and unfair.

Few persons—soldiers, sailors, or civilians—will deny the impressions that thrilled them on first sailing between the massive white battlements of Forts St. Elmo and Ricasoli into the Grand Harbour of Valetta; many will affirm that no lapse of years, nor varied life of travel and adventure, ever effaced the memories of that day. The scene is absolutely unique. The sheltered, basin-like anchorage nestles deep

down in its setting of solid, right-angled rock. On land the clear-cut works of nature and of art seem moulded into the speckless ether above and around, all merging imperceptibly into the glassy water. A kaleidoscopic swarm of brilliantly painted *dhaisos* surround the incoming vessel. The pretty boats rock on the foam tossed from the bows of the big man-of-war, and dance under its taffrail oblivious of the revolutions of the screw. A single swarthy, well-formed Maltese stands facing the prow. Is it possible that a tenth part of them can expect to make a day's living from the ship now dropping anchor? If gesticulations and outcries can do it, small Maltese fortunes will be made. A pandemonium of guttural Arabic surprises the ear—the entire situation conveying the impression of a dream, or a mythical drop-scene in a theatre.

The mind reverts, in search of a connecting link, to the historic associations of the past. The earliest traditions are of those ubiquitous

and civilizing pirates, the Phœnicians; the latest administration, before the present British rule, was that of France. Seven hundred years before the Christian era came occupation by the Greeks, followed by that of the Romans and the Empire of the East. The Arabs also held sway over Malta and the Norman rulers of Sicily and the German empire. The picture becomes unpleasant when the chivalrous Knights of St. John fight the tigers of the cruel Byzantine dynasties. Christianity had done something toward separating the man from the brute; but not much. Beyond the circle of that fleet of boats the almost tideless sea laps up caressingly to the smooth rock. That warm, limpid water has often been dyed red in the death-grapple of Turks and Christian knights. They were amphibious fighters, those warriors of the crescent and the cross, and sometimes swam with swords between their teeth, expending their religious zeal and their life's blood in two elements at once.

The visitor cannot trace such a past history intelligibly; his senses are enchained by the astonishment of the living present. But wait till the excitement of arrival is over. All will be quiet enough soon, and then he may fall back upon the events of centuries. The terraced city of Valetta, little changed, rivets the eye; so near and clear it seems one might almost throw a biscuit on shore. The situation is more than surprising—it bewilders. The mind rebels against the unfitness of the fact that this Oriental imagery is so near by rail and steamer to the foggy realism of Britain. No length of residence will lessen the sense of the contradictions of one's surroundings. The topical nomenclature, language, and traditions are distinctively Arabic; the physical features and geographical position of the island assign it to the continent of Africa; but the united wisdom of the Lords and Commons of England has solemnly declared the whole group to be in Europe! There are professional men who, in the absence of all

evidence of the fact, need to remind the public that they are "gentlemen by Act of Parliament." The dictum of Malta's interested sponsors is entitled to about as little respect; for prehistoric remains of elephants peculiar to Africa are found not only in Malta, Gozo, and Comino, but even as far north as Sicily.

Those visitors to these islands in whom the Staff College or natural taste has developed a spirit of romance, or of scientific, literary, or historical research, may reap a rich reward in the study of the flora, fauna, as well as the geology, history, and legends of the central portions of the Mediterranean. But such cases are the exception. No class of men have such rare opportunities, or abuse them so much, as officers of the English army and navy. Every avenue of authentic information is freely laid open to them. The civil authorities of the world honour and *fête* and pet them, proffering with their courtesies more valuable aid in sight-seeing than that of local guides. Yet the ignoble confession

must be made that a stay in the most deeply interesting country usually results in a passing knowledge of the wines, and a fairly accurate judgment upon the degree of beauty and virtue of the women.

And so it happens that Malta has few admirers beyond its own toiling, devout, and very dirty natives. If the ships of the squadron visited the station less frequently, and for shorter periods, the marked peculiarity of its sights would be a dream to look forward to. In midwinter the fields are in the highest state of cultivation; harvest laughs upon the scene with early spring; after that, all exposed vegetation is scorched up. Though the island is not unlike a great stone-quarry, search will reveal numbers of the greenest little gardens, each enclosed by a wall—nothing natural about it except the red blossom of the pomegranate and the verdure of the fig and prickly pear. The monotony of the flat stone roofs is the feature of a bird's-eye view from the lines of Floriana. Yet the borders of

the roads are bright with flowers, and shady corners in house-yards are quietly radiant with orange blossom. It must be squarely stated, however, that it takes a good deal of natural perfume to neutralize the evil odours that float around these southern parts of the inland sea, emanated from garlic-eating and soap-neglecting races.

Where was ever seen anything like the city of La Valette from the landing-place on the Marina? The stone stairs of Byron's historic curse connect the ascending rows of streets. A swarming population burrows in the honey-combed mass of rock. In imposing relief stands the governor's palace, where the grand-masters erstwhile held conclave. Bells clang forth from dome of church and convent, and you try in vain to locate the whereabouts of any particular peal. The bells of Malta were long a source of irritation to nervous naval and military gentlemen. Flag-lieutenants protested that, on being ordered outside after lying in the Grand

Harbour, it was positively comforting to be roused at midnight by a call to general quarters and broadsides of heavy guns. The grievance has of late years been much modified. An Italian Opera, by no means discrediting its nearness to the land of song, has also had a soothing effect upon British residents; an officer's uniform admits him for half a dollar.

There are astute merchants who render naval life less disagreeable in that maligned spot. The Baldachinos, Borgs, Marich—since dead—are well-known names of some of those who have taken the dear boys under their special protection. In their divans the tired youths repose with choice cigars, quaff curaçoa or light Sicilian wines, cash bills of exchange on good papa in England, and go off to the ship with pockets ballasted with silver dollars, very bulky and much below par. Still, I cannot endorse the current assertion that a Gibraltar Jew starves alongside a Maltese tradesman.

But the soft spell of music, the forbearance of

the priests in the matter of the bells, and the sweet wiles of the caterers to youthful tastes are no offset to the terrors of the south-west winds which blow from June to September. When these are followed by the sirocco, prolonging one's misery by mosquitoes and ophthalmic troubles, the strange little island is none the less disliked by those who occupy, in peace or war, its waters, forts, and barracks.

CRUSADER'S FLAG.

II.

THE CRUISE OF THE "ROYAL OAK."

HER Majesty's ironclad frigate *Royal Oak* lay motionless in Malta Harbour. The faces of the ship's company were as bronzed as the "Baked Friars" * on shore. The men-of-war and merchant shipping had awnings spread fore and aft. An effort of resignation, aided by now and then

* The irreverent name Jack gives to the ghastly relics of the dead brethren of the Capuchin Order. On the death of a brother his body is permanently preserved. At Rome the corpses rest for some years without coffins in dry graves: decomposition is thus prevented. At Malta we understood the same object was attained by a slow baking over a furnace on a large gridiron. Whatever the process, here are the bodies exposed in standing postures in niches

a puff of sea air from beyond the forts, rendered life endurable afloat. But on shore the go-cart drivers lay prostrate in shadow of porch and wall, wherever their sweltering limbs might find escape from the terrors of the sun. Dollars could scarcely rouse them to face the glare upon the rocks and roads; many deserting boats and carriages to kneel upon the cool mosaic pavement of the old knights' tombs in the cathedral.

in long, dimly lighted aisles. Each recess is decorated with designs in human bones, and bears the name of the present occupant. Fra Giuseppe and Fra Giovanni are given the required rigidity by wires passed through and around the body. On some of these hideous remains the hair and features of more than a century ago have been well preserved. The most repulsive effect, however, is produced in the case of the more recently deceased, the attitude and effect being attained with the exactness of the taxidermist. It is hard to realize that the Capuchin is not making an address or begging in the street. The practical Anglo-Saxon blue-jacket shows a derisive contempt for these brethren, either baked or raw; nor can he credit with saintly attributes the notorious keepers of low resorts whom he sometimes sees, arrayed in white, in a religious procession.

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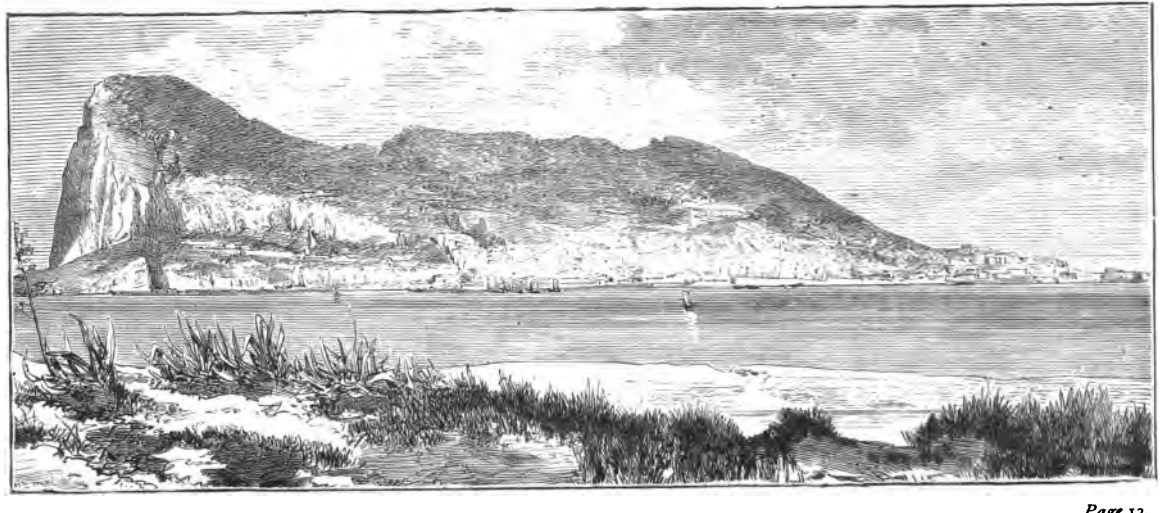

GIBRALTAR.

Page 13.

This was a few summers ago. Half of the *Royal Oak's* four years' commission had passed; the married men thought of English homes, while their juniors got what fun they could on board and on shore, and hankered after more exciting incidents. A corner of the gun-room guarded a shattered relic of chaster air than its surroundings. On a cruise of the Channel Squadron, in pitchy darkness, a gale of wind blowing, fires banked, and lower sails set, the *Warrior*, pioneer of British ironclads, mistaking a signal from the flagship to shorten sail, forged ahead, and crashed into the starboard quarter of the *Royal Oak*. We passed the night in consciousness of imminent danger, the iron plating being stove in, the fluke of an anchor driven through the vessel's side, boats crushed, and other serious damage done; so that we were detached to Plymouth for repairs. Daylight revealed amid the wreck the grand figure-head of the *Warrior* lying prone upon the *Royal Oak's* quarter-deck. The boys bore the trophy round

the Mediterranean from Gibraltar to the Piræus of Athens.

What recollections does the latter name evoke! The eternal summer that gilded for the poet the isles of Greece did us a similar favour as we escorted the young King and Queen of Greece to Corfu. How handsome and happy they were at the captain's dinner-party! John Bull appreciated neither the beautiful nor the useful when he blew up the fortress of Vido, left his military roads, and ceded so charming a property as the Ionian Islands. Albania, too, was a source of some enjoyment, giving us inferior hunting attended with difficulty and danger.

Once more pent up in Malta Harbour, enervated by the heat, we dreaded the fate of remaining there the rest of the commission. Subsequent events dispelled these gloomy forebodings; for the *Royal Oak*, besides visiting a number of delightful places, took part in the opening of the Suez Canal; and its officers

ATHENS. *Page* 14.

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represented the outraged dignity of their country at the execution of the Marathon brigands on the Field of Mars at Athens. But just now the admiral seemed disposed to let us fry and seethe in the caldron where we lay.

Our captain, who wore nine medals, came from an old sea-dog family. His mother, Lady Hillyar, at an advanced age, could sit on the steps of the *Royal Oak's* bridge, serene and undaunted by the ordeal of a royal salute from the main-deck guns. This old heroine's connection with the sea and naval officers was so widely known that on her death recently the Admiralty recognized such devotion to the service by allowing her body to be borne to rest by a detachment of seamen of the Royal Navy.

Captain H. S. Hillyar was not far from promotion to flag rank, and he had no love for Malta in summer. Through his influence our longings for fresh air were gratified. Late on the evening of a blazing day the chief engineer was ordered to get up steam in four boilers, and

at daybreak the band played as the watch hove round the capstan forward. The musicians were no longer the "scratch" band of former times, but regularly borne on the ship's books as "bandsmen." Early as it was, a score of merchants, filigree-dealers, and wine-shop keepers were on board, insisting on the payment of their little bills. Settlements were made after many rough words, for the stringency of Maltese law effectually protects the creditor; in fact, an officer in debt may be ignominiously carried on shore as his ship is leaving the harbour.

The rattling of the rusty chain-cables through the hawseholes, mingling with the strains of the band and the tramp-tramp of hundreds of bare feet on the hard deck, always made for me the sweetest music that I can recall. The *Royal Oak* had leave for a run away from the admiral, to Syracuse, Catania, and Messina; and long before "divisions" or morning parade a party was being formed for an organized ascent of Mount Etna. I had cherished a daydream of

looking down on the central portions of the great inland sea from the very summit of Etna. The apex of its crater and the pleasure of that cruise loom up as pivotal points in this narrative. Few of us had dipped far into mythology or ancient history, yet Sicily had charms for all. We knew the "Island of the Blest" was fresh and fair to-day as when the old Trinacrian gods walked and talked and fought around the treacherous flanks of Etna. The sweet-scented plains of Enna would flower for us as when Persephone, full of budding life, saw the grim King of Hades approach, the narcissus in her fair hands trembling as she is driven, followed by the pity of all the centuries, through the dark under-world to be the bride of Death. Utilitarianism has not killed romance. The ignorance of the Sicilian of to-day has not erased all of a spirit of poetry, while it has fostered feelings of superstition, so that the natives speak of their *monte terribile, famoso, immenso*, with both affection and awe.

What a number of places throughout the globe are called after this celebrated volcano! In the United States there are at least fourteen post-towns named Etna, besides an infinity of mills, mines, and coal companies. Sir Charles Lyell and G. F. Rodwell, in writing of Etna, have taken just views of the grandeur of the subject. For some it is enough that Jupiter loved Etna—as rightly the king of volcanoes as was he the ruler of the gods. Even the gloomy side of the picture is weirdly grand. To the mind the rebellious Titans are still imprisoned, while the devilish-visioned Cyclops still forge the thunderbolts of Jove. Etna, the dungeon of Enceladus and the tomb of Empedocles! What a mausoleum, with a base of one hundred miles, and a snow-covered summit beyond the clouds! * A live volcano will never lose its mystery and charm and terrors. Mystery! Why, even in this day of scientific research the grossest mis-

* 10,867 feet, by the latest reckoning of the Italian Government.

conceptions exist as to the nature and attributes of volcanic phenomena.* Volcanoes have been born and died, while Etna has outlived all.

* Apart from the delusions of the uneducated masses, school-books and dictionaries of the Old and New Worlds perpetuate erroneous definitions. The action of a volcano is not "burning," as no combustion takes place. The "smoke" is really steam, or watery vapour; the "flames" are the glowing light of a mass of molten material reflected from the vapour-cloud above the crater. But Mr. Gladstone, who ascended Mount Etna in 1838 during a slight eruption, speaks of "the sheet of flame which leapt up with a sudden momentary blast, and soon disappeared in smoke." *Absit omen!* for the words recall the noble efforts of the statesman's closing days. Murray, in his guide-books, copies inappropriate terms from various writers; and Rodwell, in his contributions to *Nature*, as in his great work on Etna, uses—inadvertently, no doubt—the same erroneous expressions. A leading paper lately spoke seriously of the "tongues of flame and clouds of smoke" ascending from a crater's mouth. Professor Judd, on whom has fitly fallen the mantle of Poulett Scrope, commits no such inaccuracy in his work on volcanoes, but scientifically refutes them. The wider range of knowledge cannot detract from the magnificence of volcanic action; so long as Stromboli remains an automatic lighthouse for mariners, no school-child will ever be in danger of forming too exalted an idea of the subject.

Retaining its pristine vigour, greater eruptions may occur in the future than those of the past. We longed to witness one. From the battlements at Malta we once saw the red reflection of the lava like a glimmer on the horizon, and we were restless, an impatient feeling prevailing while the ship's company went through the usual sea-going exercises, and fired heavy shot and shell at floating targets. A marine artilleryman on this occasion "carried away" the stick and flag from a barrel at a mile-and-a-half range from a quarter-deck pivot-gun.

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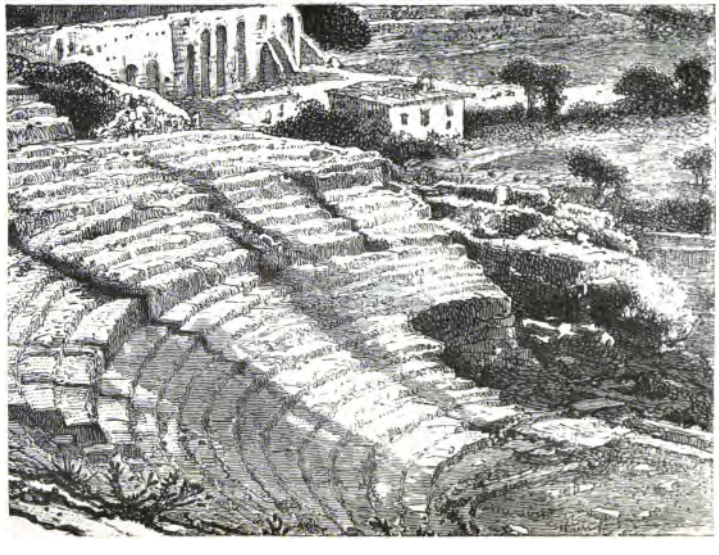


REMAINS OF GREEK THEATRE AT SYRACUSE. *Page* 21.

III.

SICILY: DEMIGODS AND DIRT.

YRACUSE detained the ship for a few days, and the anchor was no sooner down than several were on shore. Their numbers were about equalled by hangers-on calling themselves guides. The Ear of Dionysius was explored, and the remains of temples and amphitheatres. What a sense of desolation does the place convey! The Syracuse of the Greeks and Romans is crumbling underground. The Syracuse of to-day, dwindled to one-twentieth of its former dimensions, rivals in smells and dirt the worst of the Mediterranean ports. Yet the women washed—their clothes at least, for

we saw them at the Fountain of Arethusa, a venerated spot, now reduced to this practical but unpoetic purpose. The colour of the girls' dresses was gay, their figures picturesque and graceful; but those no longer girls were *passée* in the last degree.

A sense of relief came when the *Royal Oak's* moorings were transferred to the vicinity of Catania. It was beneath the dignity of a British war-ship to enter the harbour, which probably was less commodious than when the fleet of Alcibiades anchored off the town. Recently the harbour has been much improved.

There was little preparation for an enterprise which was soon found to be serious enough. What did we know of Catania and Etna? Once on leave of absence I had occupied a room in the barrack-like front of the Grand' Albergo di Catania. It was winter, and snow covered the mountain half-way down. The truncated cone, twenty-five miles distant, looked as if within a six-mile walk. It stared me in the

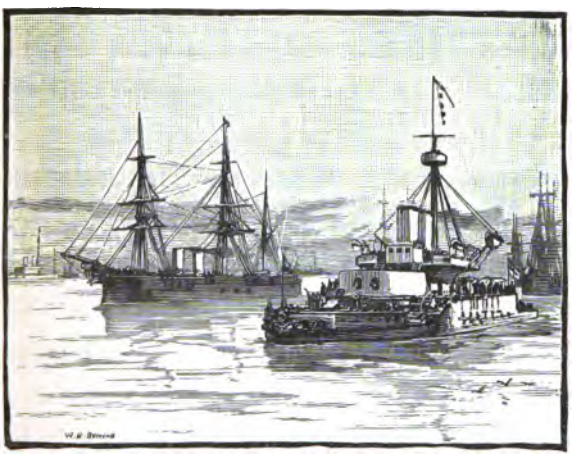
face all day, and its dismal presence haunted my room at night. An ascent at that time of year was impossible. I got, however, as far as Monte Rossi, the twin cones near Nicolosi, thirteen miles from Catania. These hills were formed during the great eruption of 1669, when lava burst incontinently from the side of Etna, and flowed in a river three miles wide a distance of fifteen miles to the sea. Beyond this meagre experience we knew nothing of the nature of the ascent. Of essential items we neglected all save food and drink, of which, being young and ravenous, and suspicious of Sicilian *menus*, a generous supply was taken. The precaution was amply justified. Some added light overcoats to their outfit,—they were the Solons of the party. On board, with a breeze blowing down the Strait, the mercury stood at 75° Fahr.; on shore it was in the nineties.

If our *matériel* was poor, the *personnel*, in our opinion, was beyond reproach. The party consisted of fourteen: Commander M. A. S. Hare,

Lieutenant Pearse; Lieutenants Heathcote and Emra, Royal Marines; Sub-Lieutenants Reeve, De Watteville, and Powell; and Messrs. Ripley, Thomas, Ommaney, Reynolds, Boxer, Anton, and Bennett, midshipmen. All were in ordinary mufti—military men would have said very ordinary. Alas for coats and hats where there is no place to hang them! How bitter the reflection that crowding into drawers and trunks necessitates the creases by which the connoisseur in High Street, Portsmouth, vows he can distinguish the navy from the army at a distance of a quarter of a mile!

Merrily we passed over the side, feeling graciously inclined toward the old ship, as a comrade is dearer when you escape him for a time. The zeal of a complement of six hundred and five persons all told, aided by French polish and red tape, kept the guns and brasswork shining like mirrors. The sun glistened on the bayonet of the gangway sentry, who was waving off some bum-boats laden with

fruit and knick-knacks for sale, while a ship's-corporal was carrying aft a plate of fresh-looking oranges, pomegranates, and purple figs. A bouquet of choice flowers was a present—and not a disinterested one—for the ward-room



MODERN IRONCLAD MEN-OF-WAR.

table. The fruit was for the inspection of the medical officers, preliminary to leave being given to sell to the crew. People take naturally to ripe figs at half a lira (fivepence) a gallon pail; but the delicious sample of fruit carried to the

ward-room could not honestly represent several boat-loads, or guarantee immunity from indigestion or worse.

Visitors, officials, guides, runners, and interpreters were boarding the ship. A courteous reception was always accorded the visitors, while the rest were tolerated, except when the ship was being coaled. Bobbing gaily alongside was a white awning and little black funnel, and the snorting steam-launch quickly landed the party at a point of the city near where the lava-torrent of Monte Rossi was stayed in its destructive course only by the waves of the sea. The lava is omnipresent; houses, streets, pavements, wells—all are built of it, and thus Mount Etna offers some reparation for the ravages it has caused. The scene is suggestive enough of the day when the molten stream hissed onward to its extinction. From its source I had traced the black, devastating course, the distance traversed, and the place of leaping the high city wall. Here is where the final desperate plunge

was made. I bought an uncouth painting of the event, with a glaring legend, "Eruzione dell' Etna, 1669," hideous in its pre-Raphaelite detail, showing the red stream, divided into two forks, hemming in the terror-stricken citizens who were perishing in the boats in which they sought to escape. Out of sixty recorded eruptions of large proportions, in which ninety thousand lives have been lost, Catania has had its fair share of casualties. The narrative cannot be glanced at, though one speculates when the city's terror will return, as it did when the lava-flood of 1832 reached the length of eighteen miles, with a breadth of one mile and a depth of thirty feet, flowing, not from the crater of Etna, but from a number of mouths which opened in the mountain-side; or as in 1792, when the eruption continued for a whole year. The vines are growing in the black slag, and the people are singing and lying and toiling, with no thought that what has been so often may in their day occur again.

Nor have Jupiter's turbulent anarchists suffered Catania to be free from continual earthquakes.

"'Tis said Enceladus' huge frame,
Heart-stricken by the avenging flame,
Is prisoned here, and underneath
Gasps through each vent his sulphurous breath:
And still as his tired side shifts round
Trinacria echoes to the sound,
Through all its length, while clouds of smoke
The living soul of ether choke." *

Virgil may well be excused for his "*flammarum*" and "*fumo*" references, in view of those of his illustrious modern followers.

On to Etna! The English party was now borne relentlessly along by an increasing crowd, amid a din of shouting, swearing, benedictions, cajoling, and, above all, begging. We surged forward against the ignoble crowd. Was this the perfumed breeze that refreshed the death-laden lungs of Proserpine on her semi-annual return to upper air? You may track a Sicilian as well as a Maltese on a dark night at a dis-

* "Æneid," iii. 578–582 (Conington's translation).

tance of a hundred yards by the garlic in his composition. Oh for some traces of the gods of Sicily! Tourists may well say nothing is left but here and there a rare wine, such as the white Marsala of an exceptionally favourable vintage, that may lay claim to the title of ambrosia.

To this day I do not know how the scattered fragments of the expedition coalesced, hot and worried, at the Grand Hotel. A Scotch skipper with flowing chestnut beard rescued myself and three others, triumphantly gaining the caboose of his topsail schooner. This diversion gave us a rapid insight into the imports and exports of Catania. The irrepressible macaroni was prominent. Raw silks were scattered on the wharf, with wines; and, of all things in the world, a brisk demand was offering for cargoes of ice! Ice and snow and slush it was from Mount Etna, with a plentiful sediment of lava-dust and dirt. Ten miles up we afterwards passed a train of richly painted mule-carts laden with ice. It

was found to be rather slushy, being gathered from the glaciers near the summit of Etna. Quantities of it are jolted down the flanks of the mountain on the backs of mules, to supply the restaurants of the Mediterranean with an inferior grade of a very necessary article.

At the hotel the thermometer marked 91° in the shade when we started at three p.m., on an immediate up-grade, in four open carriages for Nicolosi. Shortly after leaving Catania the dimensions of the base of Mount Etna were realized. Two cities, sixty-three towns and villages, and three hundred thousand inhabitants call her mother. We pass through Gravina, with its lava cottages and plots of vines, citron, and orange trees. The twin red cones rose distinct in front as the carriages moved laboriously on through Torre di Grifo and Mascalucia, and reached Nicolosi three hours after leaving Catania. Our Negretti and Zambra now showed only 65°.

The ascent is seldom made by so large a

party, and it was doubtful whether enough mules could be provided. No one was willing to remain in inglorious repose at Nicolosi. At the little inn all was chaos. Since its arrival on the station the *Royal Oak* had carried an interpreter, who proved himself eminently useful and an accomplished perverter of the truth. This class of men are apt agents in the purchase of narghileh, Turkish slippers, and general *bric-à-brac*, far more to the accomplishment of their own sweet wills than to the interest of their patrons. It would have been fairly within the powers of our polyglot interpreter to have evolved order out of the confusion that now ensued. Animals, guides, and refreshments had to be ordered, and the man who could twist round his little finger perfidious Hellenes and Maltese sharpers would have been the proper person to do it; but he was not with us.

While the one long street was being ransacked for mules, a diversion was made to Monte Rossi. The highest cone is four hundred and fifty feet,

the base being two miles round. The material thrown up, on exposure assumes the red colour that has given the name to the locality. The most striking feature of the sunset view was the track of the lava-currents through their entire course to the sea. Returning to the albergo, tired out with tramping in the dust, a copious drink of water was welcomed, but the thirstiest was disgusted with its Gehenna-like taste and odour. An explorer discovered the dreadful tank of ancient lava which supplied the only water obtainable. On the table were fruits, pickles, fowls, goats'-milk butter, and flowers. The rye bread was black and bad, but the flowers refreshed, while they gratified what little æsthetic tastes were left by our rough drive and the walk up and down Monte Rossi. The birds had so long lived upon lava-dust that even the crucial process of submitting the carcases to boiling within five minutes of dissolution, and skinned instead of plucked, failed to eliminate their leathery qualities. I record with pride

that no protests were heard. The boys were no unreasoning elderly tourists, and did not expect an ever-ready Simpson's to be maintained in every pauper village the world over for their especial benefit.

We saw the shades of night close in, with a consciousness that we *might* watch the sunrise in a few hours from the summit of Mount Etna. The mustering of the chargers progressed with such regularity that a mount of some sort was assured to each. By some unquestioned order of precedence, three guides were assigned to accompany the expedition. The municipal fathers may have held a special session for the emergency. The animals clattered in twos and threes along the darkening street, urged on by the blows of brigands old and young; none, apparently, were of middle age. Boys and girls, old men and women—two stages of life—the other acts being omitted from the play; only the young, handsome, and robust, and withered old age. It occurred to me that the beasts of

burden—bound up closely with humanity as they are in labour and climatic trials—presented the same singular phenomena in their lives. The eighteen mules gathered for this toilsome expedition were compelled to transport a party of tourists up and down the steep sides of Mount Etna after a hard day's labour with but a brief period of repose. This statement will shame neither Italy nor Sicily. Cruelty to dumb animals is inherent in the lower orders; neither the appeals of humane foreigners to successive Italian Governments, nor the establishing of agencies at private expense, has touched the deplorable evil. In the corner of a public square in Messina I saw boys immerse a living rat in tar and set fire to it. From a crowd of fifty persons not a protest arose beyond the strong expressions of my companion and myself. Had we forcibly interfered, the soldiers standing by would certainly have marched us to the station-house.

Mounting was a slow process, each suspecting

that his particular steed was the *mauvais sujet* of the troop. But in truth the day's work had left but little spirit in the poor brutes, which, with one exception, submitted tamely to the inevitable. At the start a small middy was landed on his back, cutting his left arm on a jagged piece of lava doing duty for a kerbstone. The boy plainly thought it a disgrace to be worsted so early in the fray, and was vigorously trying to remount, when Captain Hare good-naturedly insisted on an exchange. The wiry, uncombed mule made no invidious distinctions either as to rank or weight, and tried hard to throw its new rider, but two miles of ashes brought it to a proper sense of duty.

IV.

ETNA, KING OF VOLCANOES.

RED full moon rose and dimly outlined seventeen mounted figures advancing with billowy serpentine movement in Indian file. To one mule was attached a burden of pieces of plank—a mystery to be solved later on and higher up. Our first great trial was the saddles—mostly of goat-skin, with hard, knobby pommels, covered with old cloth. To our abnormal Jack-ashore philosophy it seemed to accord with the eternal fitness of things that the mule-back position should be in the highest degree painful. Three weeks before, nearly the

same party, mounted on strong, well-saddled Maltese ponies, had emerged from the blackness of Civita Vecchia, the ancient capital in the centre of Malta. Valetta was the objective point, but our gay prancers tore despotically round the greater part of the circumference of the island instead of half its diameter. As the boys afterwards said, it was holding on by the eyelashes, our heads hanging, martyr-like, where the feet should have been, as we caught inverted vistas of endless flat roofs, rows of prickly pear, and gigantic crucifixes at the cross-roads. But in the dull morning rain we trotted slowly home past Floriana Gardens and the cemetery, up through the Strada Reale along the neck of land dividing the two harbours, conscious of ultimate triumph, and of having got our money's worth. Such a spirit may account for the easy acceptance of the mules and saddles; but we knew nothing of the wretched condition to which we should soon be reduced by that intolerable jolting.

For a time the novelty of the situation induced good spirits. Relapsing from song into silence, the harsh barking of dogs broke upon the ear from a distance. Was there not a temple of Hephæstos somewhere up here, guarded by typical Mediterranean curs? They had the gift of discerning between the wicked and the good, whom alone they permitted to approach. Lately all natives at least are beggars, many of them worse, while foreign travel is garbed in strange apparel. It may be surmised, therefore, that the hopelessness of accurate discrimination has since driven the dogs crazy; they act so from Gibraltar to the Golden Horn.

The cavalcade alone broke the deathlike silence of the sleeping volcano—the occasional ejaculations of the guides, the thud of many hoofs, the vain efforts of some rash youth to manage his beast instead of wisely letting the beast manage itself. The moon shed a fantastic beauty on the scene. Most of the associations

of Etna are supernatural, and it was easy to fancy, in the shadows of lava-crags away toward the sea, figures of the fiends and demigods. "That vagabond warrior," as Washington Irving styles the adventurous hero-tramp of the "Odyssey," inquired of Silenus as to the walls, defences, and people of Mount Etna. Asking if it were a race of wild beasts who held the land, he learned that the proprietors were a race of cave-dwelling Cyclops; and, as I strained my eyeballs to outline the uncanny forms of rock and cavern, I saw the one-eyed monsters yet—Polyphemus, now in his cave, prostrate and blinded at the foot of Ulysses, and again making odious love approaches to the charming Galatea; while Acis seemed a minor character till he fell crushed by the brutal stone, and Galatea leapt into the sea.

But now from beneath the curtain of night a transformation scene was imminent for which none was prepared. A distressing bodily position did not conduce to an appreciative view of

the surroundings. The enterprise was now an onerous task, to be carried through only because undertaken. During the first shaky two hours' ride from Nicolosi the course lay through an ashy, barren district, the fruits and cereals having been left behind; we were now approaching the *selvosa*, or wooded region, so called in distinction to the *coltivata* below and the *deserta* above. Chestnuts, oaks, and beeches—though we could not distinguish the kinds—were thickening around us. I was sensible of a strange, dreamy state of mind, a knowledge of being racked with pain, with a strong desire to sleep. The least sound now fell on the ear as clearly as a bell, and the thoughts were preternaturally bright, as in a vivid dream. Can the reader recall dreams in which the soul rises above the waking level, and words seem spoken, and are afterwards remembered, far beyond one's ordinary capacity? What! Trees on Etna, foliage and verdure and beauty; shade from the hot sun and shelter from the fury of the winter's

storm? The mule was master of its own actions, and my mind revelled in a romance partaking very much of the nature of the dreams just alluded to:—

Ἐντὶ δάφναι τηνεῖ, ἐντὶ ῥαδιναὶ κυπάρισσοι.

Let me essay a rather free rendering of Theocritus:*

Laurels are there, and there are the slender shoots of the cypress;
There is the ivy so black, and the vine with sweet clusters beladen;
There is the cool spring-wave which Etna, the father of forests,
Pours, an ambrosial draught from the white snows wreathed on his forehead.

Here we have the soul of the purely pastoral poet. No tragedy; no suspicion of the fierce throes of Enceladus. One could feel superior, in a sense, to Euripides, when, on the return, the sylvan, pastoral element of Etna was practically utilized by repose beneath a heavy-foliaged

* "Idyll," xi. 45–48.

chestnut tree at the Casa del Bosco. The volcano had more than a tragic side.

Suddenly recovering a perception of external things, I became alive to a quickened and excited movement of the animals. The column had closed up, heads and tails as close as convicts in the lock-step. The pathway had narrowed, but the ground soon becoming open, the mules again formed twos and threes. Then in the clear air rang out a dozen humorous brazen-tongued neighs of delight, as the squadron, without word of command, deployed into line and abruptly halted on a grassy level. One of the guides found himself assailed by many questions at once. This man was of a spare frame, consumptive-looking, with a complexion in which jaundice was mingled with the tan. Judged without prejudice, he was of a sulky disposition, possibly with some reason—Heaven only knows by what slavish arrangement he had been enrolled for this expedition. In his own tongue he spoke little, in English or French

nothing; but his silence was quickly broken in upon by his chief, who walked briskly round, helping the tired riders to their feet. "Casa del Bosco, signori!" "What's that?" The Sicilian rubbed his hands, and made shuddering gestures to express cold; then he nodded approvingly at the building as suggestive of temporary warmth; finally appealing to our sense of the humane by patting a worn-out mule that was eagerly cropping the scanty herbage.

"The House of the Wood." The wood itself had been a relief, raising our spirits above the level of the saddles. The building was most welcome—a fair-sized structure of wood and lava, more shed than dwelling. The old man who busied himself now in kindling a fire had been asleep till his dog roused him. In the shadows of the large empty room the striking profile of his face was thrown out into Flaxman-like clearness by the light of his blazing sticks. He beckoned us to approach the fire, which we were glad to do, the temperature having fallen

to 56°. The Casa del Bosco is a resting-place for ice-parties, woodcutters, and tourists, at the foot of Monte Rinazzi, one of the many lesser cones of Etna.

After a brief stay the procession was again *en route*. From the increasing scarcity of the trees and roughness of the trial it became evident that we were entering on the desert region. The most sanguine optimist would fail to derive profit or pleasure from this stage of the ascent at night. With all their care and instinct the mules suffered badly. Mine stumbled violently in surmounting a rock that lay across the path. Probably it was the stone that crushed Typhæus. I felt struck by several earthquakes, and clung to every available part of the animal, finally settling right side up in the saddle. The increasing cold chilled us to the bone, and a raw wind added to our discomfort.

The five hours' ride up the mountain from Nicolosi to the Casa degl' Inglesi is mentally

marked off into three distinct stages—the first, joyous, light-hearted, rollicking; the second, quiet, subdued, romantic; the third stage is a memory of utter numbness and exhaustion, with the mind racked by waking dreams befitting the scenes of Pluto and the Cyclops. Oh the bitter cold of the last half-hour's approach to the beginning of the end—the highest building on Mount Etna! Poor improvident sailors! where were the overcoats that would have afforded you such comfort at this time? One sub-lieutenant, in desperation, rolled off his mule, and obtained some relief from walking, but on trying to remount he ignominiously failed, and was forced to continue on foot—which example served to restrain the others from dismounting.

Never was refuge more warmly welcomed than the desolate, uninhabited building at the foot of the great crater—the Casa degl' Inglesi. A house was first built here by British officers for the survey of Sicily nearly eighty years ago, during which time the shelter has undergone

adventures not surprising in such an unusual site, the principal, perhaps, being that of succumbing to an earthquake in 1852. There was only standing room upon the bare floor, no hope of a blessed momentary repose. A guide groped around with a lantern, and kindled the planks brought for the purpose. The smoke apparently found no means of exit but by the door. Choking and half blinded, most of us staggered outside, and improvised an *al fresco* picnic, with the mercury at 39°, and a north-east wind blowing at the rate of twenty miles an hour. Encouragement was gathered from the supply of provisions, and the fact that twelve hundred feet more, at an angle of ascent somewhere near 45°, would bring us to the brink of the crater.

For the first time since leaving the Casa del Bosco, a fair opportunity offered for conversation, and the chilly outside air was preferable to the inhospitable welcome of the "English House." But before there was time either to

suffer from the cold or enjoy an early breakfast, the chief guide was vehemently pointing to the east and exclaiming, "Avanti! avanti!" The order "Forward!" meant that if we were not at the summit at sunrise the principal object of the expedition would be lost. So the mules were left in charge of the consumptive, and we braced ourselves for the last great effort. It wanted two hours of daybreak, and the upward path had to be surmounted on foot, through what we presently found to be deep ashes, lava-dust, snow, and scoriæ.

How many tourists, worn out with the fagging journey from Catania, cowed by the bitter wind and a painful desire to sleep, have succumbed at the base of the cone, and awaited the return of their hardier comrades?—for the little house was not always so destitute of accommodation as it was at the time of which I write. If the weather is unfavourable, the guides are only too willing to dissuade travellers from any further ascent, thereby saving their labour—quite a

consideration to Sicilians—and the fee remaining the same. The desire to reach the *ultima thule* spurred us on, and not one was left behind. The boys were all so young and, despite the protracted effort, so brimful of happiness and expectation, that even the callous guides were infected with the prevailing spirit, for they now led the way with alacrity. In our favour were an unclouded moon and a brilliantly star-lit sky lighting up the Piano del Lago, over which all with renewed vigour now pushed their way. Previous to 1607 the melting of the snows each summer had formed a great lake around the base of the crater, but in that year it was filled up by lava from the volcano. Over this plain our feet sank deep in the ashes, so that when the climbing of the cone was commenced it was almost a relief.

There was nothing now to vary the dead monotony of the ascent. To look up was disquieting. I was haunted by a nervous dread of realizing too vividly the nature and distance of

the ground to be traversed; and each step had to be made with caution and firmness. With neither inclination nor ability to converse, the members of the party had become scattered, each toiling on, resolved to attain the common object; and no doubt each one feared that he alone would fail.

An exclamation roused me, and I noticed some fifty feet ahead a group of three persons gathered round a prostrate form, while close to windward of them a wreath of vapour was exhaling from a fissure in the ground. It was young Ripley; he had stopped to rest, and fell overpowered by fatigue and the sickening fumes of the vapour. We carried him some distance, and laid him on coats spread on a smooth boulder. He soon revived, and, looking into our faces, inquired, "Where's the top?" "The top of what?" "Of Mount Etna; I'm going there!" A few seconds later he exclaimed, "Hurrah, boys!" and was off at a run for the top of the crater. Poor little "Rip" made no naval history,

but he left a sunny English memory with those who knew him. Shortly after this he exchanged into the turret-ship *Captain*, in which ill-fated vessel he sank in the Bay of Biscay, with its constructor, Captain Cowper Coles, and the many hundreds of its officers and crew.

There was now a bright red glow in the eastern horizon, shading off as it darted zenithwards into orange and a greenish yellow. An oppressive feeling on the chest wore off as we neared the end. Ripley, accompanied and cheered by Captain Hare, had pushed to the front, and it was clear that those two were to win the race—and they did—the oldest and the youngest. To think how little more of life was left to the boy brings the tragic fate of his companion and counsellor across the scene. Captain Hare subsequently commanded the training-ship *Eurydice*. Returning from a cruise in the West Indies, the vessel was rounding the south-east corner of the Isle of Wight and heading up for Portsmouth under a heavy

spread of canvas. Hare had a reputation for "carrying on." Three or four hundred merry boys saw their native land, and thought with delight of spinning yarns to relatives and friends. From on shore the *Eurydice* was in full view, and, reeling under all sail, presented a fine picture to the many glasses turned in its direction. Suddenly it was noticed that a fog had hid the ship from sight. A few seconds later all was bright and clear again, but the full white sails and handsome hull were gone, and the *Eurydice* was settling on the bottom of the Channel, having been struck and capsized by a squall,—and captain, officers, crew, and boys, nearly every one perished.

V.

THE GRANDEST VIEW ON EARTH.

HE summit of Mount Etna! We were there, and the sun rose to celebrate and partake in our achievement. It was four o'clock, one hour and a half from the time of leaving the foot of the cone. Daylight was breaking up there on the broad peak where we stood breathless, but down the slopes toward the sea dusky shades still lingered, while Catania itself was darkness. As the orb of light rolled up from the Levant, we saw a ghostlike shadow of the great mountain projected into space westward over Sicily, till it was lost in the distance near Palermo.

I stood on air, fresh in body as though risen from rest in a ship's cabin, and all the crudities and gathered cobwebs of an untrained mind seemed to be brushed away with that first wide sweep of vision. But before there was time to gather any impression, the thought came quickly—*look below!* It was useless to shut the eyes to repel the rush of thoughts, for the open crater yawned black and ghastly at our feet, chaining the eyeballs and compelling attention. The abyss was not yet well lighted up, but, as one gazed spell-bound, the grim mystery unfolded itself more in detail to the eye. Every one has dreamed of such sights, and questioned how great a distance a falling body would traverse before reaching the bottom of a volcano. Tradition may or may not lie when it says Empedocles, poet and philosopher, threw himself into this crater to immortalize his name. Like Pliny at Vesuvius, Empedocles may have lost his life in the pursuit of knowledge, as numbers have done from Pliny's day to this.

The inside of the crater, as far as it could be seen, was encrusted with ammonia, sulphur, and vitriolic salts. The depth is simply appalling, the sides almost perpendicular. Should a man favour that romantic form of suicide, his body would go bounding down a thousand feet to the bottom, unless transfixed and arrested by some jagged point of lava. On this occasion we were informed in Catania that the opening was about a thousand feet deep; but of course the depth varies with the nearness or remoteness of an eruption.

The wind found its way to the bottom, for it blew clouds of vapour toward and from us, at one moment obscuring and again disclosing views of the abyss. Oh, if one could only go down there, and be so near to the great secrets of Nature! But even the ascent of Mount Etna is never absolutely safe. It was only in 1852 that some English ladies and gentlemen had nearly reached the Casa degl' Inglesi, when suddenly ashes and hot lava burst from the

volcano, placing them in imminent danger. An earthquake followed; the mules broke their fastenings, and stampeded down the mountain. The party was very thankful to make a safe return.

Next to the crater in point of wonder and attraction is the circumference of the basin—about three miles. Not a hundredth part of the scenes that occur in this vast natural bowl is ever known. The smallest eruption here causes greater unseen havoc than did the hundred and forty tons of dynamite that blew up Flood Rock.

We turned, and shaded our eyes in silence, drinking in the wondrous view. It is pleasing now to recall the fact that none of us had a word to say. Speech would have been a mockery where our very identity shrank into contemptible insignificance. The panorama around, beyond, and beneath was of such proportions that, perched up there, the feeling was irrepressible that one was not on *terra firma* at

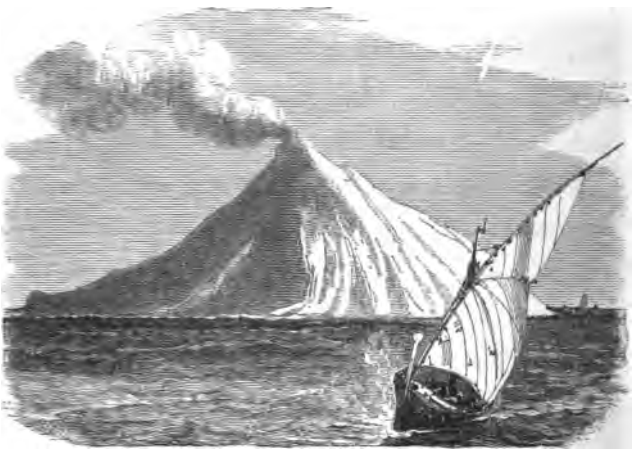
all, and one felt in danger of falling off into space. The immensity of the view from that height seemed to draw all the world near, as a child learns geography better from a blackboard than from a book. From that lone God-watched spot the Russian peasant seemed visible, plodding hopelessly to his work. While Central Europe was greeting the rising sun, the English sparrows were twittering under latticed windows, but the people were not yet awake. America was buried deep in its first sleep, and in Eastern lands millions of rice-fed barbarians knew only that their destiny was one day nearer.

There was a methodical, well-balanced youth of adipose tendency, who did things with gravity and precision, and kept his head level. We saw him select a sheltered spot and clear away some ashes that covered up a smooth ledge of rock. Then he sat down with a complacent smile and a sense of perseverance rewarded. The next instant he bounded up as though shot from a mortar. The lava was intensely hot, and our

laughter was only qualified by pity for one in such an unpleasant predicament. Dear philosophical shipmate! in two wars since that morning your gallantry in action has been marked; but, amid the changing scenes of after-life, with scars received in the front of action, I feel sure that, could I grasp you by the hand to-day, you would confess that with you, too, Etna has left the warmest memories behind!

A radius of a hundred and fifty miles of vision is a strain on the best eyesight; an horizon of nine hundred and forty-six miles is bewildering. The sun was well up now; Catania, Syracuse, and the whole east coast of Sicily were defined as on a map, as far south as Cape Passaro. Beyond the strait the west coast of Italy stretched away into the dim northward toward the Bay of Naples. A fleecy cloud of vapour overhung Stromboli, its faithful beacon extinguished only by the light of day. We saw where our ship would lie at anchor in a few hours, off Messina, between the famed Scylla

and Charybdis. The former is a headland, Charybdis is a shoal, and the two are not so mythical as is believed. Ugly cross-currents run between them, dangerous to the navigation of small vessels. In the far south Malta was



STROMBOLI, "THE LIGHTHOUSE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN."

a dot on the ocean. Sicily itself shone in flowery plains, scarred with black traces of Etna's devastation, and rolling in long waves of light and shade till in the west land and sky mingled and became one.

From other points on the earth's surface superb views are to be obtained, but either from lower altitudes or from positions where other peaks obstruct the prospect. The eighty minor cones of Etna (indeed, six hundred may be counted, if small ones are included) do not limit the view. Within range of vision was the track ploughed by British transports, the Peninsular and Oriental steamers, and other lines between Western Europe and England's Empire of the East. These are the same blue waters round which the navies of the civilized world now concentrate on the approach of any European complication. And constant French and Italian vessels ply busily between Marseilles, the Italian ports, Messina, Syracuse, Malta, and away beyond to the sandy shores of Africa.

The thermometer now marked 31°, a fall of sixty degrees in thirteen hours; but the wind had dropped to a velocity of about ten miles an hour. We were only beginning to photograph the scene upon the mind. All knew,

though vaguely, that the view comprehended a storehouse of mythology and classic memories; all knew perfectly that it comprised an infinity of brigands, wretchedness, fleas, and dirt. Does romance still rule the Hon. Mr. Hood, whose house at Maniaco was recently stormed by robbers? They may capture him some day, and send an ear as a gentle reminder to his relatives that a heavy ransom is in order. But for all the savagery, the poverty, ignorance, and filth, these shores retain the natural glories of a Southern clime. On them rose the great empires of the ancient world; and here, from the centre of the central sea, one can but think of Egypt, Greece, and Rome, of Carthage, Alexandria, and Athens.

As in geographical position Etna stands majestic and alone, its snow-clad summit accessible only to those who are able and willing to make severe physical exertion, so in its historical and legendary associations no rival can detract from its fame. In scientific interest it will long afford

an ample field for research, and one that repels voluptuaries and carpet-adventurers. Some rough old scientists and naturalists, like the Gemmellaro brothers, have become distinguished against their modest wills by living and dying on Mount Etna; but the majority either give the volcano a wide berth, or pay it the briefest of visits. To ascend Vesuvius you may leave your bed at Naples, go up on horseback varied by walking, *viâ* Resina, accomplish your object and return to dinner—all in six hours. In view of such a fact, it is unlikely that travel will ever become to any extent diverted from the beaten path. Yachting-parties, men-of-war, and savants will visit Etna, but not so the general travelling public. Catania is too distant, Nicolosi lacks all the elements of attraction, and is deficient in means of accommodation; and so, as Kilauea in Hawaii must be left unseen because it is too remote, Etna must take its place in the same category because of a conjunction of obstacles to its successful ascent.

The storming and capture being a *fait accompli*, our ambition was now limited to a wish to get down.. Etna having pretty well exhausted us, we concluded that we had exhausted Etna. The return down the mountain was devoid of incidents; at any rate a truthful narrator, who was in a partial state of coma, cannot be expected to recall any. That "sweet little cherub" kindly kept us from falling forward over the animals' heads or backward over their tails. The refraction of the atmosphere made Catania and the *Royal Oak* appear much nearer than they really were; this convenient delusion tending to keep alive a feeling of gratitude and complacency.

The sun beat down, untempered by a breath of air. Despite our drowsiness we could see where the ambrosial streams of the poet had worn smooth channels on and through and under the congealed lava-torrents; and it was comforting to slake our thirst at the cool rivulets. How we slept on the rude couches

at the little inn at Nicolosi, while carriages were being summoned for Catania!

The *Royal Oak* had steam up, and weighed as soon as the party arrived on board. The breezes of Messina and Calabria, laden with the perfume of citron, and bearing on them many thoughts, old and new, of the ever-beautiful Mediterranean, quickly relieved all sense of prostration; and with that pleasant rest came the conviction that no sacrifice was too great for the gratification of ascending Mount Etna, and that under no circumstances could we ever be induced to do it again.

THE CRATER OF ETNA.

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